

Lt Commander Walter Fletcher and Amy Johnson ✓

Notes:

Lt. Commander Walter Edmund Fletcher tried to save Amy Johnson after she bailed out over the Thames Estuary near Herne Bay. He lost his life. He and his inquest are important (held in Gillingham) as it provides a *factual* account of the death of Amy Johnson. Several questions remain unanswered approaching the 75th anniversary of her death. Plus a new group in Herne Bay are trying to raise awareness of Amy Johnson and to erect a statue in Herne Bay on the seafront looking out to sea, where she was lost & in Hull, her birth place. Commander Fletcher is buried in Woodlands Cemetery, Gillingham Kent.



Amy Johnson

The 75th anniversary of the death of Amy “Johnnie” Johnson CBE 1903-1941, she is thought to have died on January 5th 1941. Before we may add to the many theories that led up to her parachuting into the Thames Estuary that Sunday afternoon, we need to review one of the few sources of fact about the story. An inquest held in Gillingham, Kent regarding the death of Lt. Commander Walter Edmund Fletcher 1906-1941.

Captain for HMS Haselmer, Lt Commander Fletcher was 35 years old when he died trying

to rescue Amy Johnson. His parents were Reverend Canon Edward Sumner Fletcher 1859-1933 and Bertha May Fletcher 1872-1966, he had three brothers, Captain James Wilfred Moncrieff Fletcher, number-157329 1901-1996, John Francis Fletcher 1908-1996 and Royal Navy Chaplain, Reverend Anthony Joseph Fletcher 1910-1998 plus three sisters. Helen Bertha Fletcher 1895-not known, Marjorie Bicknell Fletcher 1899-1985 and Miss Irene Mary Fletcher 1904-1988 who gave identification evidence at the inquest. The inquest was held at the Royal Naval Hospital, Gillingham Kent on Friday May 16th 1941. Now called the Medway Maritime Hospital, parts of the old hospital, opened in 1905 are still in everyday use.

In charge of the inquest, which had been adjourned and delayed to take evidence from crew members from HMS Haselmer, a former ferry, was the North East Kent Deputy Coroner, Mr T.B. Bishop.

He opened the proceedings by stating Lt. Commander Fletcher’s age and that he lived at the family home, Chestnut Farm House, Aylesbury Road, Monks Risborough in Buckinghamshire with his widowed mother, Bertha Fletcher.

Bishop continued, “He (Lt Commander Fletcher) died in a gallant attempt at rescue, Miss Amy Johnson’s plane that had crashed in the Thames Estuary, on January 5th.”

Lt. Henry Patrick O’Dea, of the Royal Naval Reserve, stated he was aboard the Haselmer and at 3.30pm they were proceeding down the Thames Estuary. He was on the bridge with Lt Commander Fletcher when they saw a parachute and a plane circling around it about 40 degrees off the starboard bow and approximately a mile and half away. The parachute was about 500 feet above the water. The ship along with an escort vessel and a motor launch altered course towards the parachute. Before anyone could reach the scene, the parachute had landed in the water and the plane had crashed.

Commander Fletcher gave the order to manoeuvre the ship, part of Convoy CE21 but there was no response and the ship ran aground. O’Dea saw two persons drifting past

the ship down the starboard side but he could not distinguish who they were. From the sound of a voice from one of them, he knew one, was a woman. She disappeared under the stern of the ship and at that point Fletcher left the bridge to try and give further assistance.

Witnesses saw Fletcher throw off his coat and jump over the side. The Commander was seen to reach one of the persons about 150 feet away from the ship, and support that person for about two or three minutes.



HMS Haslemere

In reply to questions, Lt O'Dea said the weather was extremely cold and Commander Fletcher had been in the water for about twenty minutes.

Able Seaman Raymond Arthur Dean of Chester Road, Worthing was one of the crew on board the Haslemere and at the time he was on the bridge, keeping gunnery watch. He saw two persons floating in the water, one of them a woman he heard cry out, "Hurry, please, Help!" Those on the ship tried to reach the woman with heaving lines, but each time, the current took the lines away and the woman drifted around under the stern of the ship. Asked to describe the woman, Dean said, all he could say - she was "youngish-looking." and could not say whether she had dark or fair hair.

The Coroner summing up, said that it was not up to him, to solve the mystery of Amy Johnson but the cause of the death of Lt. Commander Fletcher. "There was no doubt whatsoever that he made a very gallant attempt to save someone and that the verdict must be one of 'Misadventure'." In closing, the Coroner expressed his admiration for the high courage shown by the deceased.

All the Inquest details were carried by newspapers throughout the country including Lt Commander Fletcher's local newspaper, The Bucks Herald. They also reported later, that on June 10th 1941 members of the Fletcher family were at Buckingham Palace to receive the Albert Medal, posthumously awarded to Lt. Commander Fletcher presented by King George VI.

HMS Haslemere was working on the Channel Mobile Balloon Barrage and pilot Johnson may have seen the balloons at 1800 feet above the heavy cloud cover that day. Not knowing, perhaps that she was over the sea, she bailed out of the Airspeed Oxford aircraft. The exact position given by the crew of Haslemere was 051 degrees 33'20" North by 001 degrees 12'4" East at 15.30 hours. The weather log for January 5th 1941, states that there was snow and sleet, a freezing wind and a choppy sea. The area is near the Knock John Buoy on Tizard Bank, close to the Herne Bay coastline. The woman in the water, thought to be Amy Johnson was, after twenty five minutes, perhaps unconscious from the extreme cold and had drifted alongside HMS Haslemere towards the stern. She may have been sucked towards and killed by the ships propellers as she was not seen again and her body was never recovered.

Corporal Bill Hall of the RAF on board HMS Haslemere filed a report with Derek Roberts a clerk in the RAF Thames flight office, at Sheerness Docks. Derek Roberts from Yorkshire recalls:

"I typed the report and he (Corporal Bill Hall) approved it, and I put it to the flight commander."

"He said that while he was on deck, a parachutist had come down in the water and had drifted near the Haslemere."

"She called out that she was Amy Johnson, that the water was bitterly cold, and could they get her out as soon as possible."

"They threw her a rope, but she couldn't get hold of it."

"Then someone dashed up to the bridge and reversed the ship's engines, as a result of which, she was drawn into the propeller and chopped to pieces."

“Later on in life he used to say to his neighbours that there had been an official cover-up over Amy’s death. That for some reason it had all been kept quiet.”

Serving her country with the Air Transport Auxiliary, an organisation set up to ferry planes around different airfields for the Royal Air Force. Amy Johnson was officially ‘presumed dead’ on December 1943 when the Probate Court heard further evidence from eyewitnesses.

As mentioned in the inquest report there was a suggestion that two bodies were seen after the plane crash, although when Amy Johnson departed from Squires Gate airfield near Blackpool she was alone. The admiralty issued a press release and stated two bodies had been spotted in the water. This was quickly retracted but added to the rumours surrounding the day.

She had arrived at Squires Gate on a delivery flight early evening, January 4th and spent the night with her sister, Mrs Molly Jones and her husband Trevor, who was the Town Clerk for Blackpool Borough Council. Amy had remarked that she was concerned that the aircrafts compass was not correct having just flown in from Prestwick, Ayrshire. Although making a joke of this over dinner, she claimed she would smell her way to Kidlington near Oxford, an aircraft journey time of 90 minutes. Leaving Squires Gate airfield at 11.49 - Johnson’s new aircraft was reported crashed at 15.30 hours, 3 hours 41 minutes later, on a flight that should have taken 90 minutes. She was also 70 miles off course from her original flight plan. It was this, so called missing-time that led many to suggest, she was involved on a “secret wartime mission.” One newspaper writer suggested that Johnson had connections with M15 and had begged to go on secret missions. Whatever the reason, the information from that day, is still a mixture of fact and fiction after nearly 75 years. First Officer Amy Johnson died aged 38, a pioneering aviator, who became the first female pilot to fly alone from Britain to Australia. As a member of the Air Transport Auxiliary, who has no known grave, she is commemorated by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede, Surrey. She is listed on the memorial as Amy

V. Johnson although she was never christened with any middle name.

Lt Commander Fletcher never recovered consciousness after been dragged aboard a Carley float from HMS ML113 - a motor launch, rescued by Lt. George A. Wright of the Royal Marines. Lt Commander Walter Edmund Fletcher died in the Royal Naval Hospital, Gillingham the same day. He is buried in the Woodlands Road Cemetery, Gillingham Kent: grave number 1379.



Gravestone of Lt Commander W E Fletcher

In late August 2015 during an interview on Meridian Television with reporter Derek Johnson, a surprise eye witness came forward with new information. After the Amy Johnson Memorial Air Show, in Herne Bay, David King from Kent said he had been working on a night duties at RAF Detling airfield in Kent and had “thumbed” a lift along the A249 into nearby Maidstone. An RAF low loader transport-vehicle provided the ride for Mr King and during the short journey, he claimed the RAF driver said they were carrying Amy Johnson’s plane. It was unusual because the transporter was carrying a yellow plane, as described by King, like one he knew were used for training new pilots although not in Kent, as the county was frontline so not suitable for training flights. The Airspeed Oxford, on the 5th January delivered by Amy Johnson was, to be used as a training aircraft. Her pigskin bag which was watertight and would have floated, contained a personal cheque book and her flight logbook, along with other personal effects. These items were collected up soon after the crash close to the Shoeburyness coast

in Essex. Parts from her plane, a section of the tail fin and fabric from the underside of the aircraft with the black letters '35' were recovered, washed-up from the same area the following week. Amy Johnson's identification number on the Airspeed Oxford Mark 2 was V3540. Later suggestions were made, that the second reported person seen in the water during the rescue, may have been her floating bag, bobbing up and down. Making it look like a persons, head and shoulders in the water.



Amy Johnson with her watertight pigskin bag

Amy Johnson flew from Lympne Aerodrome in Kent several times. Her first flight in a De Havilland Puss Moth was New Year's Day 1931 setting out for China. However the journey was abandoned in Warsaw, Poland. July 28th, the same year she returned for a flight to Tokyo with Jack Humphreys. In November 8th 1932, she left Lympne for a solo flight to Cape Town. Her husband Jim Allan Mollison MBE 1905-1959 later used the same airfield both as a solo pilot and with wife 1932-1938 Amy Johnson.

Mollison Rise in Gravesend, close to the old World War Two RAF Gravesend airfield is named after Jim Mollison.

At present, Mrs Jane Priston living in Herne Bay, Kent is leading a group to raise awareness of the importance of Amy Johnson's attitude "believe nothing to be impossible." The group, The Amy Johnson and Herne Bay Project would like to erect two life-size statues to the flying ace. One on Herne Bay seafront, to locally mark her achievements, planned for August 2016 and in Hull, her birth place, planned for the following month. As part of the project a team of amateurs from Canterbury

Divers, a branch of the British Sub-Aqua Club has started to search for possible aircraft wreckage.

Reflecting on her own life Amy Johnson said: "I am an ordinary woman who did extraordinary things." The 75th anniversary of Amy Johnson's death is, January 5th 2016.

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